

AMERICAN NOTES
FOR
GENERAL CIRCULATION.

BY CHARLES DICKENS.

VOLUME II.—CHAPTER I.

A NIGHT STEAMER ON THE POTOMAC
RIVER, A VIRGINIA ROAD, AND A
BLACK DRIVER, RICHMOND, BALTIMORE,
THE HARRISBURG MAIL,
AND A GLIMPSE OF THE CITY, A
CANAL BOAT.

We were to proceed in the first instance by steamboat: and as it is usual to sleep on board, in consequence of the starting being four o'clock in the morning, we went down to where she lay, at that very uncomfortable time for such expeditions when slippers are most valuable, and a familiar bed, in the perspective of an hour or two, looks uncommonly pleasant.

It is ten o'clock at night—say half-past ten—moonlight, warm, and dull enough. The steamer, (not unlike a child's Noah's ark in form, with the machinery on the top of the roof,) is riding lazily up and down, and bumping clumsily against the wooden pier, as the ripple of the river trifles with its unwieldy carcass. The wharf is some distance from the city. There is nobody down here; and one or two dull lamps upon the steamer's decks are the only signs of life remaining, when our couch has driven away. As soon as our footsteaps are heard upon the planks, a fat negro, particularly favoured by nature in respect to bustle, emerges from some dark stairs, and marshals my wife towards the ladies' cabin, to which retreat she had followed by a mighty hole of cloaks and greatcoats. I valiantly resolved not to go bed at all, but to walk up and down the pier till morning.

I begin my promenade—thinking of all kinds of distant things and persons, and of nothing near—and pace up and down for half an hour. Then I go on board again, and getting into the light of one of the lamps, look at my watch and think it must have stopped; and wonder what has become of the faithful secretary whom I brought along with me from Boston. We are travelling with our late landlord, (a Field-Marshal, at least, no doubt,) in honour of our departure, and may be two hours longer. I walk again, but it gets duller and duller; the moon goes down; next June seems far off in the dark, and the echoes of my footstep make me nervous. It has turned cold too, and walking up and down without any companion, in such lonely circumstances, is but poor amusement. So I break my stanchion resolution, and think it may be, perhaps, as well to go to bed.

I go on board again—open the door of the gentlemen's cabin—and wall up. I suppose she has taken it into her quiet, that there is nobody there. To my horror and amazement, it is full of sleepers in every stage, shape, attitude, and variety of slumber; in the berths, on the chairs, on the floors, on the tables, and particularly around the stove, my defeated enemy. He takes another step forward, and slips upon the shining face of the black steward, who has rolled in a blanket on the floor. He jumps up, grins, in half pain and half in hospitality—whispers my own name in my ear, and groping among the sleepers, leads me to my berth. Standing beside it, I count those slumbering passengers, and get past forty. There is no going farther, so I begin to undress. As the chairs are all occupied, and there is nothing else to put my clothes on, I deposit them upon the ground, not without soiling my hands, for it is in the same condition as the carpets in the Capitol, and from the same cause. Having but partially undressed, I clamber on my shelf and hold the curtain open for a few minutes while I look round on all my fellow-travellers again. That done, I let it fall on my head, and on the world—turn round—and go to sleep.

I wake of course, when we get under weigh, for there is a good deal of noise.

The day is just then breaking. Every body wakes at the same time. Some are self-possessed directly, and some are much perplexed to make out where they are until they have rubbed their eyes, and leaning on one elbow, looked about them. Some yawn, some groan, nearly all spit, and a few get up. I am among the risers; for it is easy to feel, without going into the fresh air, that the atmosphere of the cabin is vile in the last degree. I huddle my clothes, go down into the fore cabin, get shaved by the barber, and wash myself—the washing and dressing apparatus for the passengers generally consisting of two jack towels, three small wooden basins, a keg of water, and a ladle to serve it out, with six square inches of looking glass, two ditties of yellow soap, comb and brush for the head, and nothing for the teeth. Every body uses the comb and brush except myself. Everybody staves to see me using my own; and two or three gentlemen are strongly disposed to banter me on my preface, but don't. When I have made my toilet, I go upon the hurricane deck, and set in for two hours of hard walking up and down. The sun is rising brilliantly; we are passing Mount Vernon, where Washington lies buried; the river is wide and rapid, and its banks are beautiful. All the glory and splendour of the day are coming on, and growing brighter every minute.

At eight o'clock we breakfast in the cabin where I passed the night, but the windows and doors are all thrown open, and now it is fresh enough. There is no hurry or goodness apparent in the despatch of the meal. It is longer than a travelling breakfast with us, more orderly, and more polite.

Soon after nine o'clock we come to Potowmack Creek, where we are to land, and then comes the oddest part of the journey. Seven stage-coaches are preparing to carry us on. Some of them are ready, some of them are not ready. Some of the drivers are blacks, some whites. There are four horses to each coach, and all the horses, harnessed or unharnessed, are there. The passengers are getting out of the steam-boat, and into the coaches; the luggage is being transferred in noisy wheelbarrows; the horses are frightened, and impatient to start; the black drivers are chattering to them like so many monkeys; and the white ones whooping like so many drowsers; for the main thing to be done in all kinds of hosting here, is to make as much noise as possible. The coaches are something like the French coaches, but not nearly so good. In lieu of springs, they are hung on bands of the strongest leather. There is very little choice or difference between them; and they may be likened to the ear portion of the swings at an English fair, roofed, put upon ale-trees and wheels, and curtailed with painted canvas. They are covered with mud from the roof to the wheel-tire, and have never been cleaned since they were first built.

The tickets we have received on board the steam-boat are marked No. 1, so we belong to coach No. 1. I throw my

coat on the box, and hoist my wife and her maid into the inside. It has only one step, and that being about a yard from the ground, is usually approached by a chair; when there is no chair, ladies trust in Providence. The coach holds nine inside, having a seat across from door to door, where we in England put our legs: so that there is only one seat more difficult in the performance than getting in, and that is, getting out again. There is only one outside passenger, and he sits upon the box. As I am that one, I climb up; and while they are strapping the luggage on the roof, and heeling it into a kind of tray behind, have a good opportunity of looking at the driver.

He is a negro—very black indeed. He is dressed in a coarse pepper-and-salt suit, excessively patched and darned (particularly in the knees), grey stockings, enormous unbuttoned high-low shoes, and very short trousers. He has two odd gloves: one of parti-coloured worsted, and one of leather. He has a very short whip, broken in the middle and bandaged up with string. And yet he wears a low-crowned, broad-brimmed, black hat: faintly shadowing a kind of insane imitation of an English coachman! But somebody in authority cries "Go ahead!" as I am making their observations. The mail takes the lead in a four-horse wagon, and all the coaches follow in procession: headed by No. 1.

By the way, whenever an Englishman says "All right!" an American cries "Go ahead!" which is something expressive of the national character of the two countries.

The first half mile of the road is over banks made of loose planks laid across two parallel poles, which tilt up as the wheels roll over them; and in the river.

The river has a clayey bottom, and is full of holes, so that half a horse is constantly disappearing unexpectedly, and can't be found again for some time.

But we get past even this, and come to the road itself, which is a series of alternate swamps and gravel-pits. A tremendous place is close before us, the black driver rolls his eyes, screws his mouth up very round, and looks straight between the two leaders, as if he were saying to himself, "We have done this often before, but now I think we shall have a crash." He takes a rein in each; jerks and pulls at both; and dances on the splashboard with both feet (keeping his seat, of course) like the late lamented Duroc on two of his fiery coursers.

We come to the spot, sink down in the mire nearly to the coach-windows, till on one side at an angle of forty-five degrees, and stick there. The inside scream dismal; the coach stops; the horses founder; all the other six coaches stop; and their four-and-twenty horses founder likewise: but merely for company, and in sympathy with us. Then the following circumstances occur.

BLACK DRIVER (to the horses). "Hi!"

Nothing happens. Inside scream again.

BLACK DRIVER (to the horses). "Hi!"

Horses plunge, and splash the black driver.

GENTLEMAN INSIDE (looking out). "Why, what on earth!"

Gentleman receives a variety of splashes and drags his head in again, without finishing his question or waiting for an answer.

BLACK DRIVER (still to the horses). "Jilly! Jilly!"

Horses pull violently, drag the coach out of the hole, and draw it up a bank, so steep, that the black driver lets fly upon the air, and he goes back among the luggage on the roof. But he immediately recovers himself, and cries (still to the horses). "Go ahead cap'n," cries the colonel, who directs.

BLACK DRIVER (still to the horses). "Go ahead cap'n!"

Horses make another struggle to get up the bank, and again the coach rolls backward.

BLACK DRIVER, (louder than before). "Pe-e-o!"

Horses make a desperate struggle.

BLACK DRIVER, (recovering spirits). "Hi, Jilly, Jilly, Jilly, Pill!"

Horses make another effort.

BLACK DRIVER, (with great vigour). "Ally! Ally! Hi, Jilly, Jilly, Pill. Ally! Ally! Pill!"

Horses almost do it.

BLACK DRIVER, (with his eyes starting out of his head). "Lee! Lee! Lee! Lee! Lee! Lee-e-e-e!"

They run up the bank, and go down again on the other side at a fearful pace. It is impossible to stop them, and at the bottom there is a deep hollow, full of water. The coach rolls frantically. The inside scream. The mud and water fly about us. The black driver dances like a madman. Suddenly we are all right by some extraordinary means, and stop to breathe.

A black friend of the black driver is sitting on a fence. The black driver recognises him by twirling his head round and round like a harlequin, rolling his eyes, shrugging his shoulders, and grinning from ear to ear. He stops short, turns to me, and says:

"We shall get through an, like a fiddle, and hope a pleasure you when we get through an. Old o'man at home, sir;" chuckling very much. "Outside gentile, man so, I never remember 'old' o'man at home so," grinning again.

"Aye, aye, we'll take care of the old woman. Don't be afraid."

The black driver grins again, but there is another hole, and beyond that another bank, close before us, so he lets out a short shout. (to the horses again). "Easy, easy, Lee! Lee! Steady. Hi, Jilly, Jilly, Pill. Ally! Ally! Pill!"

They run up the bank, and go down again on the other side at a fearful pace. It is impossible to stop them, and at the bottom there is a deep hollow, full of water. The coach rolls frantically.

The same scene repeats itself, and the horses make another effort.

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